VENEMAN ANNOUNCES THAT IMPORT PERMIT APPLICATIONS FOR CERTAIN RUMINANT PRODUCTS FROM CANADA WILL BE ACCEPTED

Scientific Evidence Indicates No Measurable Risk to Public Health

Calls for International Dialogue to Develop a Practical, Risk-based Approach to Trade

WASHINGTON, Aug. 8, 2003--Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman said today that, after a thorough scientific analysis, the U.S. Department of Agriculture will begin accepting applications for import permits for certain ruminant derived products from Canada.

"We have a long history of safeguards in place to prevent the introduction of BSE in the United States, and the continued protection of the U.S. food supply is our top priority," Veneman said. "Our experts have thoroughly reviewed the scientific evidence and determined that the importation of certain ruminant products from Canada poses no measurable risk to public health."

On May 20, 2003 Secretary Veneman temporarily halted imports of live ruminants and most ruminant products from Canada after a cow in Alberta was found to have Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE). Today's announcement comes after a close review of the international standards set by the International Office of Epizootics (OIE)—the standard-setting organization for animal health for 164 member nations; an exhaustive epidemiological investigation into the case by Canada, during which no other animals were found to be infected; and additional risk mitigation measures put in place by Canada in response to a review of their investigation by an independent expert panel.

Veneman said that USDA weighed these and many other factors as it evaluated the risk, including the preventive measures that Canada had in place prior to the detection of BSE, such as import controls, feed bans and surveillance measures conducted at levels that met or exceeded the OIE standards.

Based on these determinations, Veneman said that USDA will no longer prohibit the importation of hunter-harvested wild ruminant products intended for personal use and it will begin to accept applications for import permits for certain products from Canada, including:

- Boneless sheep or goat meat from animals under 12 months of age;
- Boneless bovine meat from cattle under 30 months of age; Boneless Veal (meat) from calves that were 36 weeks of age or younger at slaughter;
- Fresh or frozen bovine liver;
- Vaccines for veterinary medicine for non-ruminant use; and
- Pet products and feed ingredients that contain processed animal protein and tallow of non-ruminant sources.

Veneman noted that the single BSE case in Canada and its impact on global trade call for an international dialogue on BSE to develop more practical, consistent guidance to countries regarding the resumption of trade with countries that have reported cases of BSE. Veneman said that the United States, along with Mexico and Canada, have requested that the OIE include such a dialogue in an upcoming meeting of international experts in September.

"The current OIE standards have been helpful in guiding countries with their risk mitigation efforts," Veneman said. "But we are continually learning about this disease and the science is advancing. Many countries with and without BSE have taken new steps to control and prevent it. All this places the international community in a much better position today to develop a practical, risk-based approach to addressing safety issues that impact trade. Countries knowing they will be treated consistently and fairly will have greater incentive to conduct appropriate levels of surveillance and reporting of BSE as well as to demonstrate transparency with their trading partners."

She added, "It is vital that we pursue this course so that there is consistency among trading partners and assurance to consumers around the world that their food supply is safe."

USDA Permitting Process

Hunters can immediately begin bringing wild ruminant meat products intended for their personal use into the United States, but will need a "Veterinary Services Special Permit for the Importation of Hunter-Harvested Wild Ruminant Meat," along with one of the following: a valid Canadian export certificate for game meat, or a copy of a valid hunting license or a valid hunting tag. The permit can be downloaded from http://www.aphis.usda.gov/lpa/issues/bse/bse.html or obtained by calling the APHIS National Center for Import and Export at (301) 734-3277.

Certain other previously banned ruminant meat products may be imported with a "United States Veterinary Permit for Importation and Transportation of Controlled Material." The application can be completed on line at http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/import_export.htm or can be downloaded from http: //www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/ncie , or can be obtained by calling (301) 734-3277.

Veneman said that a rulemaking process would begin immediately for the importation of live ruminants and ruminant products.

U.S. Steps to Prevent BSE

The United States remains diligent in its BSE surveillance and prevention efforts. A risk assessment conducted by Harvard University in 2001 showed the risk of BSE occurring in the United States as extremely low. The report also determined that early protection systems put into place by the USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) have been largely responsible for keeping BSE out of the United States and would prevent it from spreading if it ever did enter the country.

Prevention steps include an active surveillance program, which tests the highest risk animals. USDA more than tripled its testing in FY 2002, and its testing rates are significantly higher than the standards set by the OIE. Under the international standard, a BSE-free country like the United States would be required to test only 433 head of cattle per year. The USDA is now testing 46 times that amount, and to date, no evidence of BSE has been found in the United States.

In August 1997, to further enhance BSE prevention efforts, FDA began prohibiting the feeding of most material from ruminant to other ruminant animals. In addition, FDA and the state regulatory agencies have increased the number of inspections of renderers, animal feed manufacturers, feed mills and other firms responsible for keeping prohibited mammalian protein out of cattle and other ruminant feed. FDA has dedicated more resources to these animal feed inspections and has upgraded its tracking system and database to ensure effective and timely follow-up. FDA is working to assure full compliance with the BSE feed regulation. It annually

inspects 100 percent of the limited number of firms that actually handle prohibited material. Over 99 percent of these firms are in substantial compliance. Even if an infected animal were ever to be found in the U.S., the ban would prevent establishment of the disease.

For more information on BSE, visit www.usda.gov